

Politics

Trump Says He'll Fight for Working-Class Americans. His First Presidency Suggests He Won't.

From cutting children's disability benefits to allowing employers to pocket workers' tips, Trump tried to slash protections for the working poor in ways that have been forgotten by many.



Republican presidential candidate and former President Donald Trump works behind the counter during a recent campaign event at a McDonald's in Pennsylvania, emphasizing his working-class bona fides. Doug Mills-Pool/Getty Images

by Eli Hager

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When Donald Trump was president, he repeatedly tried to raise the rent on [at least 4 million](#) of the poorest people in this country, many of them elderly or disabled. He proposed to cut the federal disability benefits of [a quarter-million low-income children](#), on the grounds that someone else in their family was already receiving benefits. He attempted to put in place a requirement that poor parents cooperate with [child support enforcement](#), including by having single mothers [disclose their sexual histories](#), before they and their children could receive food assistance.

He tried to [enact a rule](#) allowing employers to pocket workers' tips. And he did [enact a rule](#) denying overtime pay to millions of low-wage workers if they made more than \$35,568 a year.

Trump and his vice presidential pick JD Vance have been running a campaign that they say puts the working class first, vowing to protect everyday Americans from an influx of [immigrant labor](#), to return [manufacturing jobs](#) to the U.S., to support rural areas and [families with children](#) and, generally, to stick it to

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ProPublica reviewed Trump's proposed budgets from 2018 to 2021, as well as regulations that he attempted to enact or revise via his cabinet agencies, including the departments of Labor, Housing and Urban Development, and Health and Human Services, and also quasi-independent agencies like the National Labor Relations Board and the Social Security Administration.

We found that while Trump was in the White House, he advanced an agenda across his administration that was designed to cut health care, food and housing programs and labor protections for poor and working-class Americans.

"Trump proposed significantly deeper cuts to programs for low- and modest-income people than any other president ever has, including Reagan, by far," said Robert Greenstein, a longtime federal poverty policy expert who recently published [a paper for the Brookings Institution](#) on Trump's first-term budgets.

Trump was stymied in reaching many of these goals largely because he was inefficient about pursuing them until the second half of his term. According to reporters covering him at the time, he'd been [unprepared to win the presidency](#) in 2016, let alone to fill key positions and develop a legislative and regulatory strategy on poverty issues.

He did have control of both the House and Senate during his first two years in office, but he used his only shots at [budget reconciliation](#) (annual budget bills that can't be filibustered by the opposing party) to cut taxes [for the rich](#) and to try to repeal Obamacare. By 2019, there wasn't much time left for his cabinet agencies to develop new regulations, get them through the long [federal rulemaking](#) process and deal with any legal challenges.

Trump and his allies [appear focused](#) on not repeating such mistakes should he win the White House again. Republican leaders in Congress [have said](#) that this time, if they retake majorities in both chambers, they'll use their reconciliation bills to combine renewed tax cuts with aggressive cuts to social spending. Meanwhile, Trump would likely put forward new regulations earlier in his term, in part so that legal challenges to them get a chance to be heard before a [Supreme Court](#) with a solid conservative majority he created.

If he relies on his first-term proposals, that would mean:

- Cutting the Children's Health Insurance Program, known as CHIP, by [billions of dollars](#).
- Rescinding [nearly a million kids'](#) eligibility for free school lunches.
- [Freezing Pell grants](#) for lower-income college students so that they're not adjusted for inflation.
- Overhauling and substantially cutting the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, colloquially known as food stamps, in part by defining people with assets exceeding [\\$2,250](#) as not being poor enough to receive aid and reducing the minimum monthly food stamp amount from \$23 to zero.
- [Eliminating](#) multiple programs designed to increase the supply of and investment in affordable housing in lower-income communities.
- [Eliminating a program that helps poor families heat their homes](#) and be prepared for power outages and other energy crises.
- Shrinking [Job Corps](#) and cutting funding for work-training programs — which help people get off of government assistance and train in high-demand jobs.

Get in Touch

No matter who wins the presidential election, ProPublica is planning to deepen its reporting on poverty issues, from housing to child support to Social Security benefits and Medicaid. We will be covering how the incoming administration handles federal poverty policy, as well as state and local social services agencies and private companies that profit off of the poor. Are you a current or former federal employee with insight into federal poverty programs? Are you someone with stories to pitch us on any of these topics? Reach out directly at Eli.Hager@propublica.org.

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income people and others navigate the system. This especially affected those with special needs or who have limited access to or comfort with the internet.

As a result of these and other changes, the number of uninsured people in the U.S. increased in 2017 for the first time since the law was enacted, then increased again in 2018 and in 2019. By that year, 2.3 million fewer Americans had health insurance than when Trump came into power, including 700,000 fewer children.

President Joe Biden has reversed many of these changes. But Trump could reverse them back, especially if he has majorities in Congress.

Perhaps the main thing that Trump did with his administrative power during his first term — that he openly wants to do more of — is reduce the civil service, meaning the nonpolitical federal employees whom he collectively calls “the Deep State.”

This, too, would have a disproportionately negative impact on programs serving poor and working Americans. Agencies like the Social Security Administration and the Department of Housing and Urban Development, which provide disability and survivor benefits and housing assistance to lower-income families in times of need, rely heavily on midlevel staff in Washington, D.C., and local offices to process claims and get help to people.

Trump campaign national press secretary Karoline Leavitt did not respond to a detailed list of questions from ProPublica about whether Trump wants to distance himself from his first-term record on issues affecting working-class people or whether his second-term agenda would be different.

Instead, she focused on Social Security and Medicare, saying that Trump protected those programs in his first term and would do so again. “By unleashing American energy, slashing job-killing regulations, and adopting pro-growth America First tax and trade policies, President Trump will quickly rebuild the greatest economy in history,” Leavitt said.

One new ostensibly pro-worker policy that Trump, as well as his opponent, Vice President Kamala Harris, have proposed: ending taxes on tips.

Trump officials and Republican politicians have long said that more federal spending on safety net programs is not the solution to poverty and that poor people need to be less dependent on government aid and exercise more personal responsibility.

And working-class voters — especially white men without a college degree who feel that their economic standing has diminished relative to other demographic groups — have joined the Trump movement in increasing numbers. What’s more, some counties that have seen large upticks in food stamp usage in recent years continue to vote for him, despite his attempts to shrink that program and others that people in these places rely on. (All that said, Trump’s supporters are better off on average than the media often portrays them to be.)

Meanwhile, pandemic relief, including stimulus checks, did start during the Trump administration and helped reduce poverty rates. But those efforts were temporary responses to a crisis and were mostly proposed by Democrats in Congress; they were hardly part of Trump’s governing agenda.

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